



Virdee, S. (2014) *Challenging the empire*. Ethnic and Racial Studies, 37 (10). pp. 1823-1829. ISSN 0141-9870

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Deposited on: 27 August 2014

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Challenging the Empire

Satnam Virdee

The Empire Strikes Back (TESB) (1982) is arguably the most important book written about racism in late twentieth century Britain. In a series of powerfully-argued chapters, members of the Race and Politics Group based at the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) made transparent the multifarious ways in which racism remained central to the workings of British society. From highlighting the significance of state racism in managing the organic crisis of British capitalism (Solomos et al) to exposing the racial blindspots of sociological, feminist and Marxist theory and practice (Carby, Lawrence and Parmar), the volume broke new ground. Along with the publication of Ambalavanar Sivanandan's *A Different Hunger* and Robert Miles' *Racism and Migrant Labour* in the same year, TESP opened up innovative, productive lines of enquiry and research into racism that would eventually contribute to a paradigm shift in the sociology of race and ethnicity. Its allure came not only from its substantive content and innovative theoretical framework, but also the authenticity of its collective voice. As Paul Gilroy points out in the preface, four of the principal authors were of Caribbean descent and one of South Asian origin. Another key contributor - John Solomos - had origins in the former British colony of Cyprus. The year before had witnessed the great urban unrest throughout the main cities of England. The book spoke directly to the concerns, fears and hopes of black and brown Britons living in 1980s Thatcher's Britain - from the standpoint of those Britons - in a way that nothing which had come before had.

Given its radical content, and political intent, it is perhaps unsurprising to find that TESP generated considerable controversy. It remains, I think, the only book in the field of race and ethnicity that has been reviewed twice by the same author in the same journal - *Race and Class* - once critically, and then more warmly (see Bridges 1983a and 1983b). More seriously, Jock Young (1983, 134) - speaking from the standpoint of the colour-blind Left - criticised the authors of TESP for producing 'rhetoric' that is 'simply ideological: it views any acknowledgement of evidence contrary to its view of the world as political treachery.' He then went to accuse them of depicting 'black culture and politics in an unambiguously glowing light. The writers rather than "telling the truth" adopt the role of intellectual cheer leaders. They have committed an act of propaganda, not of scholarship' (Young 1983, 135).

One of the principal points of controversy centred on Paul Gilroy's attempt to re-think the relationship between race and class, and draw out its implications for the politics of anti-racism. Gilroy and the TESP traced how the relationship between race and nation was re-configured with the arrival of migrant labour from the Caribbean and the Indian sub-continent in the 1950s and 1960s, giving rise to an explicit indigenous racism that viewed a previously external presence as threatening the imagined British way of life from within. This new racism emerged onto the national political scene most significantly during the 1970s when it was employed by parts of the State to re-assert its authority amid the organic crisis of British capitalism. Significantly, for Gilroy, this racializing nationalism was a crucial ingredient in manufacturing and sustaining racist divisions within the working class. That is, the white working class' allegiance to a racist nationalism overrode any attachment to fellow class members

subjected to racism such that the ‘popular discourse of the nation operates across the formal lines of class, and has been constructed *against* blacks’ (Gilroy 1982, 278). Central to the construction and maintenance of this division were the institutions of the working class – the Labour Party, the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB) and the trades unions - who

...failed to represent the interests of black workers abroad and at home, where black rank-and-file organization has challenged local and national union bureaucracy since the day the ‘Empire Windrush’ docked. We are disinclined to the pretence that these institutions represent the class *as a class* at all (Gilroy 1982, 305-306).

In the absence of working class solidarity against racism, Asian and Caribbean people were forced to combat racism through black self-organization (see also Sivanandan 1982). According to Gilroy, the implications of such black autonomy for socialist politics were profound. Racialized minorities - from being peripheral to working class politics in classical socialist accounts - were now brought centre stage, and imputed with a vanguard role that Marx had attributed to the working class as a whole:

In our view of class formation, the racist ideologies and practices of the white working class and the consequent differentiation of ‘the blacks’ are ways in which the class as a whole is disorganized. The struggles of black people to refuse and transform their subjugation are no simple antidote to class segmentation, but they are processes which attempt to constitute the class politically across racial divisions – ‘that is which represent it against capitalism against racism’...these struggles do not derive their meaning from the political failures of the classically conceived, white, male working class...it appears that autonomous organization has enabled blacks...to ‘leap-frog’ over their fellow workers into direct confrontations with the state in the interest of the class as a whole (Gilroy 1982, 304).

This was a profound critique of the theory and practice of the Left in Britain, and controversy and polemical debate inevitably followed. Robert Miles (1982, 3) charged that ‘continued utilization of that terminology [i.e. ‘race’] ultimately hinders any attempt to counter racist arguments’ (cited in Ashe and McGeever 2012, 2022). He refused to find a place for actually existing anti-racism informed by political blackness in his Marxist theoretical framework claiming:

...the “use” of race as an analytical concept can incorporate into the discourse of antiracism a notion which has been central to the evolution of racism. As a result, anti-racist activities then promote the idea that “races” really exist as biological categories of people. Thus, while challenging the legitimacy of unequal treatment and stereotyping implicit and explicit in racism, the reproduction within anti-racist campaigns of the idea that there are real biological differences creating groups of human beings sustains in the public consciousness a notion which constitutes an ideological precondition for stereotyping and unequal treatment (Miles and Torres 1999, 26).

But such criticism only served to highlight Miles’ monochromatic understanding of the Marxist concept of ideology, and made explicit the additional analytic purchase

that the authors of the TESB had derived from drawing on Stuart Hall's (1980) pathbreaking re-thinking of ideology as another key site in the class struggle. Hall rejected Miles' Althusserian understanding of race as a dominant ideology and showed there was a struggle over its meaning such that:

The racist interpellations can become themselves the sites and stake in the ideological struggle, occupied and redefined to become elementary forms of an oppositional formation...The ideologies of racism remain contradictory structures, which can function both as vehicles for the imposition of dominant ideologies, and as the elementary forms for the cultures of resistance (Hall 1980, 342).

Miles' failure to understand the significance of antiracist action constructed around the racialized identity of black in 1970s Britain created immense difficulties for him – theoretically, and in terms of political practice. Against a backdrop of the state racism unleashed against Britain's racialized minority populations, it left him advocating support for an idealized and unified class subjectivity that he hoped would emerge out of a shared class position in the process of production. The idealist and reactionary nature of this position was made explicit by Gilroy (1987, 23) in no uncertain terms when he contended that:

This position effectively articulates a theoretical statement of the 'black and white unite variety'. The consciousness of groups which define themselves in, or organize around, what becomes racial discourses is rendered illegitimate because of its roots in ideology. It is consistently counterposed to the apparently unlimited potential of an ideal category of workers. This group, the repository of legitimate and authentic class feeling, is able to transcend racial particularity in political practice uncontaminated by non-class subjectivity.

While Gilroy's account of racism, class and the politics of anti-racism in the 1970s was more convincing than the one offered by Robert Miles, there were important lacunae that few scholars at the time picked up, and which have significant implications for his theoretical and political perspective. One fundamental gap emanates from his failure to identify and explain the emergence of an episodic current of working class anti-racism, particularly within the organised labour movement. It was from the early 1970s, that parts of this movement shifted from a position of indifference towards racism to one of actively challenging it, including most notably in support of Asian women workers on strike at Grunwick (Virdee 2000). A second gap relates to the instrumental role played by socialist activists, particularly those of racialized minority descent, in the establishment and development of the Anti-Nazi League (ANL). Irish Catholic, Jewish, Asian and Caribbean socialists were often the conduit through which anti-racist ideas, consciousness and political practice came to be transmitted into the left-wing of the organized labour movement and then beyond (Virdee 2014). In that moment of the late 1970s when the class struggles were brought into alignment with those against racism, an organic fusion of social forces took place where racialized minorities through a consciousness of their colour arrived at a consciousness of class; and parts of the (white) working class in recovering their

class instinct arrived at a consciousness of racial oppression (see also Sivanandan 1982).

What such evidence of working class anti-racism signified theoretically was that the efforts by Gilroy to consign the working class subject to the dustbin of history were premature. Instead, the late 1970s demonstrated that black autonomy or racial formation wasn't an alternative to working class formation in moments of systemic crisis as Gilroy (and Miles) had claimed but rather its essential precursor. It provided a brief, tantalising glimpse of the potentially liberating power of a broad-based multi-ethnic solidarity before such collective resistance was crushed under the iron heel of a consolidating neo-liberalism (see Virdee 2014).

For reasons outlined elsewhere (see Virdee 2010), there are few traces left of this productive engagement with neo-Marxist thought of which the TESB was the most important example. Since the 1990s, research within the field of racism and ethnicity studies has tended to focus on the cultural at the expense of the economic; on the theory and politics of recognition and understanding difference rather than the theory and politics of inequality and redistribution. Sustained accounts of racism and its articulation with class and the development of capitalism in the age of globalism are rare (for important exceptions see Bhattacharyya et al 2002; Virdee 2006). And reflecting this altered state of affairs has been the almost wholesale abandonment of the workplace and its institutions as a legitimate site of study to explore how racism works. And with it of course have gone the workers – black, brown and white.

Significantly, key questions about the role of capitalism in perpetuating and sustaining racialized class divisions are no longer the focus of research as they once were with devastating consequences for political projects seeking liberation from capitalism. Bartolovich (2002, 2) reflecting on this process more generally has concluded that there is now a growing consensus 'on the political left as well as the right – that capitalism is an untranscendable horizon.' Despite this grave state of affairs, many within the field continue to remain enthralled by the historical moment of the 'post' and have thus far failed to register the deleterious theoretical and political consequences of embracing the turn away from a 'Marxism without guarantees' with its insistence on focusing on questions of power, domination and social change inherent to historical capitalism. Others more astute have registered how the 'two halves of "late modernity" – the postcolonial and the analysis of the new developments in global capitalism – have proceeded in relative isolation from one another' (Hall cited in Bartolovich 2002, 3). Indeed, Hall has pointedly referred to those who, in their zeal in countering the deleterious theoretical and political effects of a certain economistic, teleological, reductionist kind of Marxism have produced 'not alternative ways of thinking questions about the economic relations and their effects...but instead a massive, gigantic and eloquent disavowal (cited in Bartolovich 2002, 3).

As we find ourselves mired in the latest organic crisis of British, and global capitalism, there is a pressing need for those working in the field of racism and ethnicity studies to reorient themselves towards better understanding the contemporary relationship between racism and power, particularly how racism informs the political management of the contemporary crisis. Re-visiting TESB would be an invaluable starting point in developing such an analysis because the authors

bequeathed an innovative and conceptually sophisticated tool-kit to understand both how racism works in such moments of indeterminacy, and how it might be challenged when the boundary conditions of politics are being renegotiated and reset.

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